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ABSTRACT

Six judges evaluated 20 randomly selected essays from a remedial writing program at the University of Houston to study racial differences in writing and the reasons for such differences. The judges, who were not informed of the race of the writers, examined the essays for the following writing features: free associations, redundancy (ineffective repetition), quotations/misquotes, sermonizing and moralistic tone, references to the Bible, word choice, use of metaphor, and use of proverbs, maxims, aphorisms, and cliches. The judges found 339 of these features in the essays by black students and 83 in the essays by white students. The averages were 56.5 features per black student and 13.8 per white student, a ratio of more than four to one. The most striking differences were in redundancy, the use of quotations, sermonizing/moralizing, and references to the Bible. It was argued that these differences might be a function of cultural language experience, particularly the influence of the traditional black church service. It was suggested that teachers should be alert to these stylistic features so that they might help black students develop a comfortable writing style to meet the demands of college writing. (RL)

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Black Writers in the Classroom: A Question of Language Experience, not Grammar

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Much research has been published on the linguistic differences between Black English and so-called "Standard English." We, as composition teachers, have been urged to recognize these differences in our students' essays and to treat them as differences and not mistakes. But no matter how we treat such dialect differences, we are still charged with the responsibility of teaching all our students to produce well-developed, logical expository essays.

The teacher of the basic skills course is faced every semester with classes comprised of students who speak various dialects of English. It is the teacher's responsibility to bring all students to a specific level of competence in their written work. The teacher with a sizable number of Black English speaking students must decide whether or not these students need something other than, or in addition to, the work assigned to students who speak a more standard dialect. To do this, the teacher must understand how, and to what extent, the speech of the Black English speaking students influences their writing. Research done in this area may not help the teacher in reaching a decision as the results of these studies are often contradictory.

This paper briefly reviews the majority of research done to date and then describes studies done in conjunction with the basic skills program at the University of Houston. These studies seem to indicate that grammatical differences are not the major problem that our Black English speaking students face in learning to write in our college classes. The studies do, however, point to a similarity between the discourse style of spoken Black English and that of compositions written by these students. It is this "discourse style," in many cases, which presents the greatest difficulty in preparing students for college writing. Based on a suggestion by Michael Linn (1975), I will

argue that the mode of discourse used in the compositions of many of our black students is related to or influenced by, albeit indirectly, the discourse mode used in the traditional black church service.

After Black English was convincingly described as a legitimate dialect with systemized grammatical and phonological rules (Labov, 1970), the assumption was made by some that these rules also carried over to the writing of Black English speakers. Many studies were carried out between 1968 and 1976 to ascertain to what extent the writing of Black English speaking students was influenced by their spoken dialect. The results of many of these studies are far from compatible. On one end of the continuum (e.g. Berger, 1968), findings indicate a higher occurrence of certain nonstandard syntactical markers present in the writing of students than in their speech. Other studies (e.g. Briggs, 1968; Whittaker, 1973; Terrebonne and Terrebonne, 1976; Funkhouser, 1976) indicate one of two things -- either a parallel between the grammars of speech and writing, or similarities produced by dialect features undergoing changes in writing resulting in identifiable patterns. On the other end of the continuum (e.g. Smitherman, 1969; Heard and Stokes, 1975), studies show relatively little relationship between the spoken grammar and the written grammar, to the point that Heard and Stokes (1975) describe their students as "functionally bidialectal."

It wasn't until 1973 that any studies were done comparing the writing of black students to the writing of their classmates. Kirschener and Poteet (1973) found no significant differences in the nature and frequency of nonstandard English markers in the writing of black, white and Hispanic community college students. The next year Sternglass (1974) studied essays written by 304 black and white students and found, with the exception of invariant be, a quantitative difference but no qualitative difference in the use of nonstandard features. In other words, both black and white students made the same grammatical errors

in their writing, but the black students made them more frequently.

In a relatively recent study, Piche, Rubin, Turner and Michlin (1978) sought to determine whether teachers could reliably infer the racial identity of writers based on the presence or absence of black nonstandard written English markers. They found that teachers "were not able to 'correctly' identify race of writers of the black nonstandard written English compositions more than 50% of the time;" in other words, no more than chance.

A similar study was carried out in the basic skills program at the University of Houston. English 1300 is a self-paced course comprised of students who fail to score 40 on the Test of Standard Written English, a low ceiling test which is part of the SAT. In the 1977-78 academic year (Fall and Spring semesters), 1,383 students were enrolled in English 1300. Of these, 46.8% were white, and 35.8% black.

The Director of the 1300 program, Professor Jeanette Morgan, in an unpublished study (1978) to determine whether or not our black students' essays could be identified by the presence of grammatical formatives, provided four judges (linguists) with randomly selected essays written by the students of the abovementioned course. The linguists were able to identify the race of black students correctly only 39% of the time. These findings are consistent with previously mentioned studies which have suggested that the use of nonstandard grammatical formatives is not confined to a single race of student.

Nevertheless, it was still felt, based on intuitions and experience of teachers, that identifiable traits existed in the writing of many of our black students. Consequently, a study was designed to try to determine what these traits were. A stratified random sample of ten diagnostic essays was obtained balanced for race, gender and essay length. Also, essays which clearly indicated

the race of the writer in the content were deleted from the sample (e.g., essays on subjects such as Black Power, civil rights, reasons for black students attending college, etc.). Grammatical errors, principally incorrect subject/verb agreement, pronoun reference, tense markers, and spelling were removed from all essays. The essays were then typed and distributed to seven experienced English 1300 teachers. The teachers were asked to identify the race of the writer of each essay, giving reasons and specific examples from the essay to support each choice. The teachers were able to correctly identify the race of each writer 80% of the time.

This is, of course, a pilot study only and further research is needed to substantiate this claim. Nevertheless, with such a significant percentage of correct responses, we were led to speculate that, without the distraction of the grammatical formatives, which do not appear to be race-specific, experienced teachers could predict the race of black writers by some other aspect of the essays. In general, the teachers listed similar reasons for identifying both black and white writers -- content, word choice, phrasing, rhetoric, sentence patterns, tone, and point of view. The identifying features teachers claimed to perceive in the writing of black students included the use of free association as a generative principle, redundancy, use of quotes and misquotes, use of proverbs and cliches, references to the Bible, sermonizing, moralizing, and word choice.

These comments, in turn, led to the formation of two questions: 1) Is the written discourse of our black students consistently different in the above respects from that of our white students? and 2) If so, why?

In an attempt to answer the first question, six judges, three of whom were independent of the 1300 program, were provided with twenty randomly selected essays, ten by black writers and ten by white writers. The judges were not informed of the race of the writers of the essays. They were provided with the following list of features:

Features

1. free association as a generative principle

tendency to stay at the same level of generality or abstraction; jumping from one idea to another in such a way that the paragraph constantly shifts in focus resulting in a lack of focus altogether.

2. redundancy

ineffective repetition of an idea either in the same paragraph or throughout the essay; the idea may be stated a little differently each time, but no new information is added; this repetition is not used as a cohesive device.

3. quotations

(a) use of quotes;

(b) misquoting: using quotes which may reasonably be doubted or which are obviously misquoted; free adaptation of quotations.

4. sermonizing and/or moralistic tone

use of moral or prescriptive statements without detailed support; the taking for granted of a shared morality with the audience.

5. use of proverbs, maxims, aphorisms, cliches

6. references to the Bible and/or use of the Bible as the greatest authority

7. word choice

(a) making up words that do not exist in English;

(b) using a word in the wrong context.

8. use of metaphor

The judges were asked whether any of these features appeared in the twenty essays, and, if so, to circle each instance of a particular feature. Their findings are summarized below:

NUMBER OF FEATURES FOUND BY 6 JUDGES IN 20 ESSAYS

Feature	Black Writers		White Writers	
	Total no. of features identified by all judges	Average no. of features identified by each judge	Total no. of features identified by all judges	Average no. of features identified by each judge
1. free association	34	5.7	10	1.7
2. redundancy	22	3.7	2	.3
3. quotations	26	4.3	5	.8
4. sermonizing/moralistic tone	76	12.7	11	1.8
5. proverbs, cliches, etc.	58	9.7	25	4.2
6. reference to the Bible	20	3.3	0	0
7. word choice	90	15.0	23	3.8
8. metaphor	13	2.2	7	1.2
TOTALS:	339	56.5	83	13.8

The conglomerate of features as identified by all judges was 339 in the writing of black students as compared to 83 in the writing of white students. This is an average of 56.5 features identified in 10 essays written by black students as compared to 13.8 features in 10 essays written by white students, a ratio of more than 4:1. The most striking differences appeared in redundancy, the use of quotations, sermonizing and/or moralizing, and references to the Bible.

These findings give rise to our second question: why is there a consistent difference in the written discourse of our black and white students, and how can we account for this difference?

What I would like to argue is that, at least in part, the differences that we see may be a function of differences in cultural language experience. As previously stated, a suggestion made by Linn (1975), as well as the work of Geneva Smitherman (1977) and the findings of the study just described, all seem to point to an influence of the traditional black church service.

According to Smitherman, the traditional black church plays an important part in the culture and verbal style of black Americans. Smitherman says: "It is within the traditional black church that traditional black folk ... create much of their reality, which includes the preservation and passing on of Africanized idioms, proverbs, customs, and attitudes."

Today, although not all blacks go to and support the church, there has been a "heavy preservation of Africanisms in the church which have had an impact on Black American culture at large" according to Smitherman. Consequently, although the sacred style of the black church may be considered the domain of the church, it also overlaps with the secular section of the culture to form what Smitherman calls a "kind of sacred-secular circular continuum."

Also, the church provides, perhaps, the most formal discourse style in the black culture. Although the atmosphere of the church service is informal, "there are traditional rituals to be performed, and codes of proper social conduct must be observed." Students may fall back on the formality of their church experience when they find themselves in the composition classroom. Just as Heard and Stokes (1975) found that the classroom context provides sufficient motivation to elicit standard English performance in their students' writing, it seems that the classroom context also provides sufficient motivation to

elicit students' most formal styles of writing. It is not unreasonable to assume, then, that the student, knowing his writing must be formal, may fall back on perhaps the most formal language model of his experience, that of the church.

The call-response pattern, probably the most common mode of black discourse, (c.f. Smitherman, 1977), is used in the traditional black church service between both the minister and his congregation and also between members of the congregation. The calls form the bulk of the discourse.

The minister's call, described by Linn (1975) and Holt (1972) as "stylin' out," uses many different rhetorical devices, depending on the individual minister's style. On the whole, it is rich in Biblical imagery, metaphor, simile and idiomatic expression, contains much repetition, moralizing and extended narration, and is usually based on shared information or knowledge. The Minister's sermon may be not only the most formal type of discourse in black culture, but also the most respected. As Linn points out," ... since the minister is the man of words for the community, he does provide an example that these students often try to imitate in formal situations such as composition classes."

A student's attempt at imitation does not guarantee effective imitation, however. And even when the imitation is effective, the mode of discourse being imitated is often inappropriate for the occasion.

Appendix A is an example of an essay which suggests the influence of the discourse of the black minister. This is an exit essay. It shows that the student is aware of the format required of the expository essay but becomes sidetracked. The thesis statement (line 7) "Abortion is cruel and against all Divine laws; therefore, abortion should not be legalized" promises the reader a discussion of why abortion should not be legalized. The reader is led to expect one section (or paragraph) on the cruelty of abortion, another explaining how abortion goes against all Divine laws, and a third joining these ideas to

argue against the legalization of abortion.

However, the writer does not deliver what his thesis statement promises. Instead, he goes on, in his second paragraph, to support a pro/con thesis statement which is never presented. He is, in fact, giving reasons why abortion should be legalized.

In his third paragraph, beginning on line 15, the student begins using a discourse style which is similar to the style of the black minister's sermon. At this point, the student has assumed a shared morality with the audience and uses moral and prescriptive statements. He is adopting the ethos of the black minister which presumes the pathos of the audience to be that of a congregation: "The killing of innocent blood is one thing the Lord despises. The only acts of killing should be in a war and capital punishment." This mode of discourse continues to the end of the paper.

Paragraph four, beginning on line 19, like paragraph three, does not mention abortion. Instead, the student prescribes how sex should be used and goes on to encourage his readers to obey the word of God.

The last paragraph, lines 26 and 27, incorporates a quote from the Bible: "Do not rely on your own understanding." This is a misquote of Proverbs 3.5. The student ends with an ultimatum, line 27: "Either we obey or be disobedient."

The Minister's call is not the only part of the black church service which seems to be imitated by our students. The call by the congregation, or an individual member of the congregation, better known as testifying, also seems to be imitated in some students' papers. Testifying is defined by Smitherman (1977) as "a concept referring to a ritualized form of black communication in which the speaker gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth, and power of some experience in which all blacks have shared."

Appendix B is an example of what appears to be student testifying. The assignment was a paragraph entitled Accident Report. This assignment occurs half-way through the course. The student has already been exposed to the methods of expository paragraph development and the use of cohesive devices. She begins with an opening narrative device: "One day when I was very young ..." and continues narrating to the end of the first paragraph.

The second paragraph leads up to the moral and testimonial. The student says that although the accident caused her much pain and grief, she is grateful to the Lord that she is still alive and realizes her life could have been worse.

Notice that three of the four transitional devices used are used illogically. The however in line 3 joins ideas not of contrast but of addition. The also in line 13 links contrasting ideas. And as a result, used in line 14, joins unrelated ideas together.

Of course, much more research remains to be done in the area before any generalizations can be made. However, there is reason to believe that our black students in English 1300 use the features described to a far greater extent in their written discourse than our white students. Teachers should be alert to these features as a means of helping students develop a style with which they are most comfortable but which also meets the demands of college writing.

Abortion -- A Way of Life or Death?

People all over the world have been making up excuses how to kill others and get away with it. The consequences usually fall on the helpless and the ones who cannot speak or take a stand for themselves. Abortion, the induced termination of pregnancy before the fetus is capable of survival as an individual, fits this criteria because it does not give the unborn child an opportunity to speak against the act. In this case, the individual is not given a chance to speak for it also. Abortion is cruel and against all Divine laws; therefore, abortion should not be legalized.

The main reason why people favor abortion is because it rids the mother of an unwanted child. There are different reasons why the child may be unwanted. The mother may have been raped and does not want her child by someone she may not know and certainly does not like. The mother may just be pregnant, in marriage or out of marriage, and does not feel that she wants to cope with the taking care of a child.

The Bible should be our guideline for every aspect of life. The answer to any question someone needs to know can be found in the Bible. The killing of innocent blood is one thing the Lord despises. The only act of killing should be in a war and capital punishment.

The Bible, which is the word of God and the mind of Christ, states that sex was given to man and wife for pleasure in marriage. Sex was not intended to be used as a hobby as it is used today. Any other act or way that sex is used outside of marriage is a sin and an abomination against God. Many people are going on human philosophy instead of the word of God. Let us reason together. Man's philosophy has faults and errors but God's plan is perfect. This results from the minister or pastor-teacher preaching and not teaching the individual.

The Lord said, "Do not rely on your own understanding." The answer is evidently clear. Either we obey or be disobedient.

Appendix B

Paragraph 5

One day when I was very young I was involved in an accident. The accident happened at my house. It involved my sister and me. The accident occurred at the house when our store caught on fire. It was a large fire; however, my older sister grabbed many pieces of cloth to put it out, but she could not do it by herself. So my sister lost control of herself and she threw the burning cloth out of the door and it fell on me.

I cannot recall back to each step that was taken because my mother explained to me what I know, as of today. As time passed my sister felt that I hated her, but I did not because she did not know that I was sitting on the steps. I was in the hospital for quite some time. My mother told me that I had to be taught how to walk again. However, it took longer for me to learn to walk again. The older I became, the more I thought about my accident because it was very hard to accept in my life. Also, I think back and see how the Lord has blessed me to be in the land of the living; as a result, my life could have been worse.

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